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Kansas in the 80's



*Being some recollections of life
on its Western Frontier*

By

MARY LILLIAN FAETH

THE PROCYON PRESS

• Publishers, New York

Kansas in the 80's

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MARY JILLIAN BATH
1941

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DEDICATION

*Dedicated to the members of the twenty-five year
club of The Faeth Company, Kansas City, Missouri.*

FOREWORD

WHEN I first moved to Massachusetts to live with my daughter, about ten years ago, people looked either bored or amazed when I mentioned Kansas. To most of them, no doubt, it sounded very far away and almost like a foreign country. But I've noticed lately they seem interested. I suppose that is because so many of them have read William Allen White's book. What he wrote about is familiar to me from hearsay. But while he was settling the politics of Eastern Kansas, I was living through exciting days on the Western border of the state. Anybody who knows Kansas knows how different those two parts are.

Kansas in the 80's

MY JOURNEY to Kansas began with the wedding of Mary Lillian Plank and Charles E. Faeth on June 21st, 1887, in Bloomfield, Davis County, Iowa. Immediately after the ceremony my husband and I were escorted by the bridal party to the railroad station on the main line of the Rock Island Railroad, where, in the middle of smiles and tears, we boarded the train for St. Joseph, Missouri, the first break in our journey. We spent a few days there in what seemed to us a very busy city, sight-seeing, shopping and visiting.

We took the next step of our adventure by the aid of the Union Pacific Railroad, the only one then crossing the continent. Our ultimate destination was Sherman Center, Kansas, a new town on the frontier, forty miles from the railroad and fifteen miles from the Colorado border. At that time, the Center, as it was usually called, was fighting with two other towns, Eustis and Voltaire, to see which would become the county seat. Eustis had the temporary honor until the question was finally decided.

After a long dusty and tiring journey we got off the train at Wallace, Kansas, glad to breathe the good fresh air again and feeling as if we were really getting near our new home. My husband had gone West a year before and in his many letters he had boasted of the beauties and the

pleasures the new country offered. Among the things he wrote most about were the drives over the wonderful plains behind the splendid livery horses. Imagine his chagrin when his best friend drove up in front of the hotel to take us on our long overland trip, in a carriage drawn by one very good looking horse and one runty little mule. It has always been a question in my mind which was the more embarrassed, my husband or the horse.

So, with much banter and shrieks of laughter, we began the last leg of our journey to our new home — with a mule, a horse, a comfortable carriage and youth. The atmosphere was heavenly, the sun shone clearly, while ahead of us stretched the colorful Kansas prairie and the endless horizon.

As we rode we heard the story of our strange steeds. On the way to meet us, one of the team, the fanciest livery team in the whole county, had been taken violently ill and could not go on. By sheer luck, which we took to be a good omen for the future, this happened half a mile away from a homesteader's sod shack. This good-hearted settler had loaned us his only means of transportation, a mule to help us on our journey. That sick horse might have created a very serious situation. Travellers were few and sod houses rare. The telephone and telegraph had not yet reached the frontier. Except for that shack and the good

samaritan who owned it, a bride and groom might have been left stranded at the railroad station.

In this day of automobiles and airplanes it is hard to imagine or even for me to remember that entire day spent driving cross country on roads made only by the ruts of settlers' wagons, over natural sod or buffalo grass which had never been turned. I do not believe we passed a single traveller and the few settlers we saw seemed surprised when they waved greetings. It should have been tedious but it wasn't. Everything was new and fascinating to us.

The mule seemed to take on new life when we approached his home and was apparently as glad as we were to find that the horse had recovered his health and could take over his rightful job. Our benefactor accepted our thanks with a dry smile and few words and did not urge us to linger.

As we plodded along the prairie seemed to grow more and more colorful. Coming to what was practically a desert, we saw that this color came from millions of cactus-blooms which seemed to carpet everything. Suddenly, far ahead, this color was reflected in a blue lake miles long, with houses and trees beside it, and cattle. We knew there was no lake and no houses or cattle or trees within hundreds of miles. This was the first mirage I ever had seen. As more appeared each one seemed lovelier than the one

before. I wonder if they still appear now that the country has been cultivated. Could they be seen from an automobile going a mile a minute?

At last we could see Sherman Center, a speck far ahead on the horizon. It seemed to take a long time for us to get there. The hotel stood out above the rest of the town. It was a two-story building, set upon corner blocks, the only one in town. The village was built around a square called "The Park" which was nothing but a block of buffalo grass, with a bandstand in the center. I was to learn later that everything happened on this square from band concerts to exhibitions of roping wild horses.

The business houses which surrounded the square were small temporary buildings. No one wanted to invest in a permanent building until after the election which would decide the location of the county seat. Yet all of the essential businesses were represented, including a weekly newspaper. Homes were dotted around all four sides of the square in an irregular fashion — not on streets but on paths.

Of course the first thing we looked at was the Charles E. Faeth Hardware Store. I have no doubt it was exactly like all the other buildings, but it still stands out in my mind. All my husband's savings after three years of traveling for a wholesale house had been put into that building

and its contents. There was our present and our future. I felt a lump in my throat when I looked at it.

I will never forget that first supper at the hotel. Its official name was the Sherman House, but it was usually called Prewitt's, after the people who ran it. We ate at a long table with twelve other guests, all men. They were the bachelor merchants of the town. To my disappointment they looked exactly like the merchants at home, in Bloomfield, except they were younger and more bronzed, and somehow more determined-looking. I noticed with great pride that my husband was the youngest of them all.

But where was the typical frontiersman? Where was what they now call "the glamor"? As I recovered from my shyness I looked around and saw Cowboy Charlie. He was obviously a personality, tall, slender and handsome. His equipment was complete, full cartridge belt, two revolvers, a wonderful buckskin jacket, and leather boots. He might almost have been the screen hero of today except that he looked less artificial. His manners were courtly and he made a low sweeping bow in acknowledgment of his introduction to the bride. Perhaps I was a little disappointed when I learned later that he too was a business man, a cattle raiser, and lived prosaically with his old

mother in a sod house some distance from town. There he was holding down a claim.

I was surprised the other day to have one of the youngsters in my family ask what I meant by holding down a claim. It made those pioneer days somehow seem very far away. It meant living on land given by the government long enough to establish title to that land and make it your own. Two years ago there had been no white men in this county with the exception of a few herders. Now the Indians had all gone onto reservations provided by the government or farther West to better hunting grounds. The passing of the buffalo had left no game here of interest to the red man. Now the government was offering all sorts of inducements to white settlers. Strange to say one heard no complaints about government interference, from these sturdy pioneers. The Indians were the only ones who complained.

Another thing I remember about that first hotel supper was that they served canned oysters in my honor. Cove Oysters, they were, cooked, canned, and shipped from California. I was used to them at home. My husband had told of eating them at a church supper in Sherman Center. But I was surprised to see that they had really reached this faraway place. Perhaps some of the present generation, accustomed to the wonders of modern refrigeration, are

just as surprised to know that we ate canned oysters anywhere in those days. But they tasted good and I don't remember anyone's ever having been poisoned.

The next few weeks were busy ones, getting acquainted with people and strange things and preparing our new home. Lots were given away in the towns to those who would live on them. It was required that a building should be built on the lot. My husband had bought a building almost exactly like the stores around the square. We continued to live at the hotel while we struggled with the job of what is now known as remodelling. I shall never forget our arguments with the hardheaded German from Nebraska who served as both interior and exterior decorator — the town carpenter.

How proud we were when we at last moved in. It was only a four-room house, but that made it the largest residence in town by one room. Otherwise it was just like the others. There was no bathroom. In fact there were no bathrooms in the town. The plumbing was all outdoors. We bathed in large washtubs. Water, from one of the four wells in town, was delivered to us in a barrel which stood at the corner of the house. The pumps at these four wells were powered by large windmills. I can still remember how fresh and cool that water tasted.

We cooked and heated the house with a funny little

Topsy stove, a small two-lidded affair but most effective. For fuel we used coal but some of our friends had coal oil stoves. Of course there were people who cooked with what were still called "buffalo chips." Don't believe the stories you hear about that being the only fuel used on the frontier. There are always people in every community who are willing to put up with makeshifts.

Although our plumbing and our heating were primitive, we had one link with luxury and life Back East. That was our piano. Another young couple moved back home shortly after we came and had to leave their piano behind because of the expense of moving it again. You can imagine the cost and effort which went into getting even a small upright piano across those plains. I will never forget the day it was moved into our house. What happy evenings we spent around it singing all the songs any of us ever knew.

Social life on the frontier was very much like that anywhere. The people were young, active, interested and interesting. All our amusements were self-made and simple. We sang, at home and in the church choir. We entertained each other at supper parties, and we played whist. In other words we made the best of what there was available. But there were differences — customs which have long since disappeared — incidents which were unusual.

One day, shortly after we moved into our house, I was startled to hear shots outside. I rushed to the back door and opened it. There I saw a cowboy on a beautiful buckskin pony riding around the yard in circles firing into the air as fast as his revolver would work. There were no fences on the lawns of buffalo grass and nothing to prevent his having his fun. When he saw me his revolver flashed back into its holster, off came his sombrero and with a low bow, almost over the horse's head, he dashed away. You can imagine how thrilling that was to a young matron still in her teens. That was my first introduction to a real cowboy.

When I say a real cowboy, I want to emphasize the real. The ones we saw on that frontier bore no resemblance to those in Wild West stories one reads in the magazines and the distortions one sees on the screen. The cowboys I saw were true Americans, smart, capable, and courageous. The women of the community always felt them to be a great protection. They often came to town in bunches bringing a herd of wild horses and put on for the settlers a show of which Buffalo Bill would have been proud. These were quite unlike, I imagine, the shows my grandchildren go to see in Madison Square Garden. No rehearsals — but real action. A wild horse was a wild horse, not one trained to act wild. Some times it took hours to get near enough to halter one of these animals. When a lasso went over the

head of a pony and he came to the end of the rope, he rolled over and over. And the man on another horse at the other end of that rope was not looking for applause from the gallery — if he failed to stay in his saddle it meant humiliation in the eyes of his own friends. What these men did took real artistry and patience. I sometimes wonder where they got the intelligence and the power to keep the energy of those animals under control without injuring the horses mentally or physically. These men really loved horses. It must have been a gift of the great wide spaces. Remember they were not training horses for future exhibitions. They were training them for use and part of the job was to leave the animal with a good disposition and almost human intelligence. The fact that these exhibitions were given against a background of the vast expanse of nature instead of bleachers full of paying customers made them more wonderful to see.

I said these ponies were being trained for use. Sometimes they were used while they were still being trained. You should have seen the expressions, somewhere between fear and anguish, on the faces of some of the tenderfoot stage-coach passengers after a forty-mile ride from the railroad behind ponies still wild enough for a cinch rope. A cinch rope was made of hemp about an inch and a half thick. It was carefully inserted into the mouth of the

animal by a clever trick of the cowboy. It was used long after the horse had become used to the lasso and had been put into harness. If not carefully used it would tear the pony's mouth wide open. It had a slip knot and when the animal started to plunge or lie down, throw himself about in frenzy, kick wildly at the tongue of the stage, or pull any other fancy tricks, the rope could be pulled so tight over the lower jaw that it had an immediate calming influence.

These horses, before they were captured and put to useful work, roamed wild across the prairies. I do not know where they came from originally. I mentioned their use by stage coaches. That was only a small part of the market for them. They were trained and shipped into the corn growing states and further East. There were various kinds, broomtails, cayuses, mustangs, and broncos. I saw an article about them in a magazine the other day, and I didn't like to learn that they are almost an extinct species.

One hears a great deal about the cowboys drinking. After their business in town was attended to, they would gallop over the plain singing at the top of their voices, and could be heard long after they were out of sight. It was obvious they had been drinking enough to make them merry, but never enough to make them neglect their jobs or become a nuisance. Whatever they drank, bad as it

probably was, had enough pep in it to make them feel daring and skillful. But I never saw any of the drunken wildness that I have heard and read about. Compared to a modern Saturday night they were almost mild.

Speaking of the cowboys' drinking brings to my mind a question my granddaughter asked me the other day, "Did they have a bar at that hotel?" She did not know that no liquor was sold legally in Kansas, then as now. But there was a large washtub in the back room of the drug store which was always full of a brownish liquid in which some sort of bark floated and some of the men in town used to drink this in cups. I do not know what the bark was there for or what kind of bark it was. I never saw the back room. But my husband said the liquid had a kick like a mule. How he found that out I could only guess. Family drinking had not become a social custom in those days.

There were a few other kinds of wild life in addition to wild horses. There were prairie dogs, and of course jack rabbits of unbelievable size and speed. Prairie dogs lived in underground holes grouped like villages and it was amusing to see them sitting there one minute and disappearing into the holes the next. They looked like gophers. In fact until I looked the name up in the dictionary the other day, I always thought they were gophers,

under another name. But it seems they are a distinct species.

There was another form of animal life which often was called to our attention. Whether one would call it wild or not is a question. I am referring to the native flea, as annoying as a mosquito, as active as a sand flea on the beach. These fleas were as common as house flies and no respecters of persons. It was nothing unusual to see the best of society wet its fingers and go after one of these pests. A minister who really understood his people would try to cut his sermon short if his congregation became too restless under these relentless attacks.

Instead of a minister, I should have said the minister, there being only one, and one church, the Methodist. This church was the well-organized center of the community life and enjoyed a religious monopoly. The one occasion on which that monopoly was challenged resulted in one of those frontier incidents which fiction writers like to treat as typical, but which, I assure you, was a novelty to us. During the summer a roving minister came to town. He was not a Circuit Rider and had no connection with any church. He was merely a religious fanatic who had seen his duty and was determined to bring us into the paths of righteousness by preaching on the streets. The people did not like him, partly because he looked like a

brigand and partly because there was little need for his line of goods. We were there to watch and work more than to pray.

The climax came in the midst of a town meeting which was being held to prepare for the first election of city officers. This meeting was interrupted by the sound of many revolver shots. The entire town rushed to the square. Several cowboys, in town to celebrate, had the preacher in the midst of a circle and were making him dance by firing their guns at his feet. It was a strictly illegal proceeding but the city fathers joined with the rank and file in shouts of approval and roars of laughter. That was the last appearance of this self-appointed minister in a town where he was neither popular nor trusted.

In addition to the fleas there was another pest in the form of tramps. Where they came from and where they went and how they found their way across the vast plains I never knew. But they came and often. One day one pounded on the door of a home on the outskirts of town and demanded that the housewife cook him a dinner. These were the days when women were still supposed to be of the clinging vine type but this time he picked the wrong woman. Instead of feeding him she ran him away with a revolver and left him uninjured only because she was a poor shot. That not only eliminated that tramp but

rid the community of the breed in general. They must have spread the word by their mysterious grapevine that the women of Sherman Center were not to be threatened. I tried to be nonchalant when this happened but I must confess that I was glad we lived in the center of town, since I had no ambition to be a heroine.

There was still another kind of animal life on the frontier which has now become almost extinct — oxen which were much used by the settlers for heavy hauling and plowing. A fine team of these were responsible for one of the many surprising things which happened to us. One day as we were returning by stage from a visit with the Barlows, who had just moved across the Colorado border, there appeared ahead of us a man driving a team of oxen. The stage driver, thinking to make time, pulled out of the two ruts which marked the road and started to pass this slow-looking outfit. Much to our surprise the driver of the oxen gave a guttural grunt and the oxen began easing along beside our horses. After keeping even with us for about a mile they began to gain with long strides. In spite of the efforts of our driver and horses, they drew away from us and soon left the stage far behind. It sounds incredible to me even now, but it happened.

In spite of the fact that we all referred to tenderfeet

in a scornful tone, that's what we all were when we first arrived. Living on the frontier was something to be learned and there was only one teacher — experience. For instance there were blizzards which were as bad out there in the winter of '87 and '88 as they were in New York, and much more dangerous. We were as innocent of what a three-days' blizzard could do as were the Pilgrims when they landed on Plymouth Rock. The snow drifted through the cracks and had to be shovelled from the floor just as the dust did in the summer. Those who were lucky had plenty of fuel. But even then there was the question of livestock to be fed. Once out of sight of the house there was nothing to guide you and you went round and round with the wind. Lives were lost not only from one's becoming confused in the great open spaces but in trying to reach livestock a few yards away from the house. I shall never forget the time my husband was lost for three hours driving home from a place three miles away. That he got there was almost a miracle because he had no idea where he was until he almost bumped into the house. Luckily the horses knew their way. However, the pioneers were adaptable. They learned to be always well-stocked with fuel and to stretch wires, along which they navigated in stormy weather from their houses to the outbuildings.

There was another problem which we never did solve —

a problem which man has never solved through the ages. Every known scheme for rainmaking from gunpowder to prayer was tried at one time or another on that frontier. They all failed as everything of that kind has failed since. But gradually the science of dry farming was developed so perhaps we did find the solution after all.

Nowadays women are too busy with careers of their own to take part in their husbands' business. In those days we all were familiar with the problems of the family store or shop and on many occasions were active in helping. After all, everything depended on trade then even more than now.

Some things stand out in my memory about that store. I was proud of the new front with double doors on each side and a grand show window in the center. And we painted the big new sign ourselves from the first C of CHARLES to the last E of STORE. I say we, because I helped mix the paint and sometimes wielded a willing if uncertain brush.

Then what to put in that window? I can remember my husband pacing the floor at night trying to solve this problem. People had to buy staples from us, tinware, lanterns, nails, guns, cutlery, hammers, knives, blankets — all the plain necessary articles hardware stores always carried. But they wanted little things to make their homes

more comfortable and livable. I mean vases, music boxes, albums, plates, tiny china figures, leather novelties, all the things one sees on the counters of novelty stores today. The question was — where would we get them? At that point there came into our home a book which I am sure received far more attention than the Bible. It was a Butler Brothers catalogue. There was the whole story, a new gospel, "Big Sales at Little Profit" and pages of items to sell. All we had to do was to guess at the right ones. My husband always said he did the guessing and I did the listening. I guess he was right. Anyway the selections made were profitable. We filled the show window. We put in counters near the front of the store where people looked first. And we made new signs. "*Everything On This Counter 10 Cents*" or "*Everything On This Counter 25 Cents*," just like the big chains today. There was this difference — the merchandise Butler Brothers sold us was never shoddy. Or is that the prejudice of an old-timer? At any rate those tables were cleaned off and sold out every Saturday night and people came back for more.

I read an article in a big magazine the other day written by a Yankee storekeeper. It told of all the slick tricks he thought up to get people to buy things. I wish I could remember some of the things we did, being always sure to see that customers got their money's worth. The one

that sticks most in my mind was "Faeth's Early Western Peas." Garden seeds were one of our biggest items, partly because people needed gardens and partly, I suppose, because they had a great curiosity to see what would and what would not grow in that strange soil. Anyway we bought peas in bulk and that's the way they were sold. But somewhere my husband ordered some small envelopes with gay lettering and a trademark, "Faeth's Early Western Peas — Selected and Best Quality." These were filled with the best of the bulk peas and sold for lots more money. They were selected all right. I spent many weary hours doing that selecting myself, and I know.

While our business and the others in town were prospering, the fight for the county seat went on. There was no violence but many muttered threats which came mostly from a few hotheads in each community. The towns were only about fifteen miles apart. Glaring visitors from Eustis would ride around our square and vice versa but I remember no real fighting. To complicate the situation, a new town company was organized six miles from Sherman Center, which was known as Goodland. Before there was a real town there, they had won the election. We always wondered why, because they all made the same offer, free lots. We heard vague mentions of railroad influence, to which we didn't pay much attention. Sure enough Good-

land did become a division on the Rock Island as soon as the line was put through. Maybe that had something to do with it.

The great majority of the people accepted the election and were anxious to settle down to business. Not so with Eustis. There they refused to give up the records and threatened, in fact even tried, to burn down the courthouse. Finally it became so bad that the Governor called out the militia. When this small detachment of men went through Sherman Center there was great excitement. By that time the people in our town had gotten themselves thoroughly aroused and many of the men decided to go along and help enforce the law.

I'll never forget standing on the square watching these men go into our store and come out with guns and ammunition which I knew were fresh from our stock. I never did know whether these arms were taken from the store or loaned willingly. My husband didn't get very excited and the stuff all came back. Even this small show of force settled the issue for good and all. Eustis offered no further resistance.

After this most of the business men in Sherman Center prepared to move to Goodland. No — I do not mean pack up and move. I mean just move their houses and stores intact to the new location. The prairie was perfectly level

so hills were no problem. Goodland was all marked out in advance and each store or house went to its proper place like moves on a checker board. The stores went first — then the homes.

The actual moves were made by real horse power, not that calculated by an engineering formula. Eight horses were hitched in tandem to the building by heavy chains and harness. Large logs, eight or ten of them, were placed under the house. The horses then pulled the building its full length along the logs, which were then reset and the process repeated until the destination had been reached.

I was quite excited when it came time to move our house. But I followed the plan we had worked out and everything started all right. We put the dishes, and anything else which might fall, on the floor. At least we were off with some trembling on both my part and that of the house. The only trouble came from our little Topsy stove, or rather from its pipe, which began to shake as if it would collapse any minute. There was only one thing to do, so I stood and held the stovepipe all six miles. If that sounds like a simple matter I suggest you try it sometime. At last we attained our objective — breakfast in Sherman Center and lunch in Goodland six miles away, all in the same house on the same day cooked on the same stove. Not so dramatic as breakfast in New York and dinner in San

NEVER was DAY TOO COLD or WEATHER TOO FROSTY to affect the MAGNETISM of a CHEAP COUNTER.

CONTENTS OF OUR "SIXTY DOLLAR" ASSORTED CASE OF "5-Cent Counter" Goods.

Comprising ONE DOZEN EACH (except where otherwise stated) of the following articles:

IF we should happen to be out of a few of these items, we will put in something equally good, but in no case shall such changes exceed twenty items of the whole 168 dozen.

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The above case of 168 Dozen costs you \$60.00.

If Attractive Show Cases Calling Attention to the "5-Cent Counter" are Sent Free

"HERE'S YOUR PROFIT!"

You sent the store at 5c each, and you realize	\$100.00
They cost you	60.00
Your profit	\$40.00

Your experience with a "CHEAP COUNTER" will POINT OUT THE WAY for "Department Store" Possibilities.

